

# Old Duxbury's Oldest Houses

By REV. CANON ROBERT MERRY

Two events have triggered this article. First of all my visit to the Hunt House and my observation of the meticulous care and creative imagination and I might add considerable expense with which Courtney and Gregg Jordan renovated this ancient jewel of Pilgrim architecture, and, secondly, the reading of Senator Gore's outstanding exposition of man's situation via his present life style on the planet earth. His book is appropriately titled *Earth in the Balance*. How people used to live on this planet from the dawn of history and even before, and how this related to the environment in which they found themselves became instantly a matter of absorbing interest.

I remembered reading the late Fred Potter's description of Duxbury's earliest inhabitants even before the ice age in the *Duxbury Book*, and his documented assertion that people lived here as early as 7,500 B.C. Fred has drawings of their probable habitats and some artifacts that take us way back long before history. We have been made aware of the presence of what are now called "native Americans," whom we called "Indians," but scholars say they arrived in southern North America only around 650 A.D. These latter were a hunting and fishing folk who required vast open spaces and wide tracts of water for their livelihood. They lived in wigwams, large cones of long poles covered by animal hides with a hole at the top to let out smoke of their home fires.

The clash between their life style and that of the Europeans is one of the great tragedies of history. Today as we seek to husband our planet's life-sustaining treasures we realize that their ideas of respect for the environment must be implemented today or we will bereave our future generations of a base for living. Attempts were made by colonial settlers to "civilize" the Indians by organizing what were called "Prayer Towns" under the leadership of John Eliot. Some progress was made and the Virginia legislature appropriated 20,000 pounds to further the work, but Indian resistance in the form of massacres turned this appropriation into a movement of extermination and we all know how sadly the issue was handled on both sides and that is all now a part of our history.

Thanks to the friendliness of the Wamponoags under their great leader Massasoit, the Pilgrims survived that first grueling winter although with the loss of half of their number. The layover of the *Mayflower* that first winter was also an important factor and they built their houses in the spring, close together for warmth and protection. Until 1627 and the allotment of land each family was given an acre of ground from which to extract a modicum of sustenance. After that each family was allotted 20 acres per person per family and farms sprang up all along the shore and far inland. And here is where they built their first houses. The migration to Duxbury began rather early, its flat meadows and marshes appealing to the settlers as well the ease of communication with their home base in Plymouth. I have lived and sailed from what is now called "the Nook"

for upwards of 25 years and although I have seen no reference to the ease of travel between this spot and Plymouth I feel sure this was a definite influence. To have a relatively constant source of wind and a deep water channel (it is now 6 feet at mean low tide and then it was probably 9) free of tidal fluctuations must have had an effect on the decision to build the first permanent houses here.

Most readers of the *Clipper* know the first shelters the Pilgrims built have been set up at the Plimoth Plantation. They consisted of the crudest form of dwelling imaginable, using easily available stones for a chimney, pine strips for framing and thatch for roofing. The chimney was based on a large fireplace in one end of the shack, and the other end was furnished by a loft with a ladder for access. It is a very sobering experience to visit this Pilgrim Village and see the austere foundation of our American way of life.

As soon as Pilgrims moved out of this primitive village they built what must have seemed at the time spacious and comfortable houses, 9 of which have been preserved for us to see today (including 2 that are just across Duxbury's boundaries in Kingston and Pembroke, both then part of Duxbury). I have visited and taken snapshots of these houses with for the moment a brief description, hoping that interested folks might want with owners' permission to visit them and reflect on the beginnings of America they exemplify.

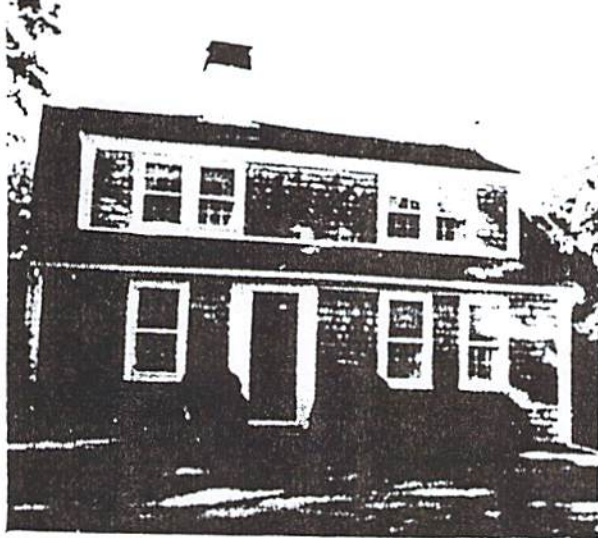






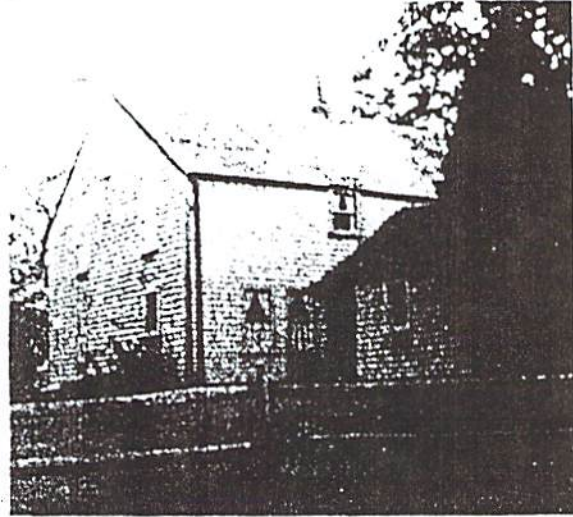
Hunt House, 1641

1641—The oldest house in Duxbury is the Hunt House off 3A and Hounds Ditch. It is only one year newer than the Sparrow House built in 1640. Present owners are Courtney and Gregg Jordan.



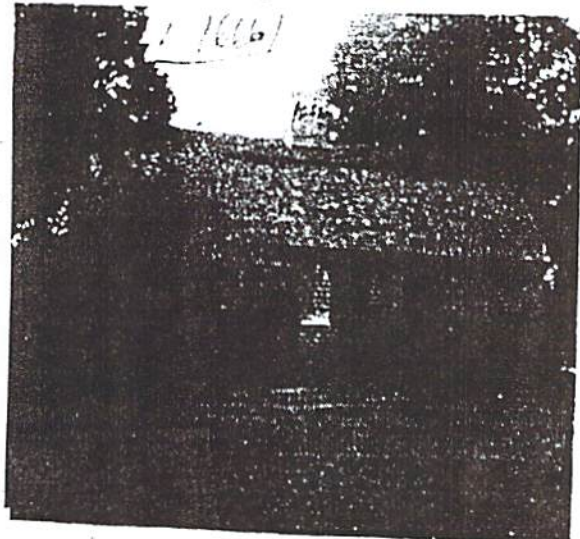
Crab Island House, 1642

1642—This is the Crab Island House built by Constant Southworth and forming the keystone of a vast industrial and commercial complex where the second gristmill of the colony was built in 1636 and later served as the approach to Ford's and Weston's enterprises until the railroad came through in 1871.



John Alden House, 1653

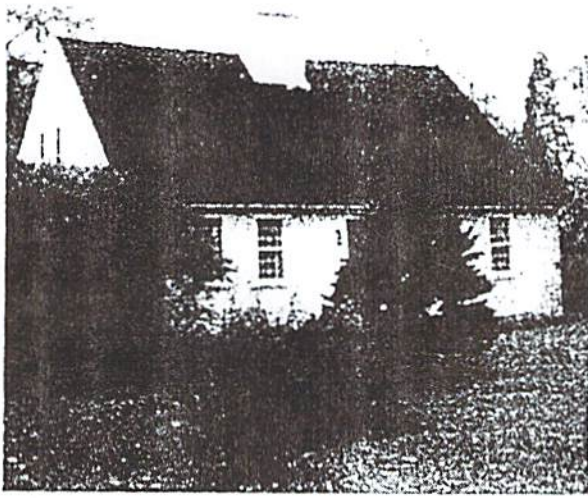
1653—The John Alden House is unique in that it was built and owned by the Alden family for nearly 3 centuries until it was bought by the Alden Kindred in 1907. The cellar hole of the original house is roped off nearby with a bronze and cement plaque signifying the date of this first dwelling as 1627.



Alexander Standish House, 1666

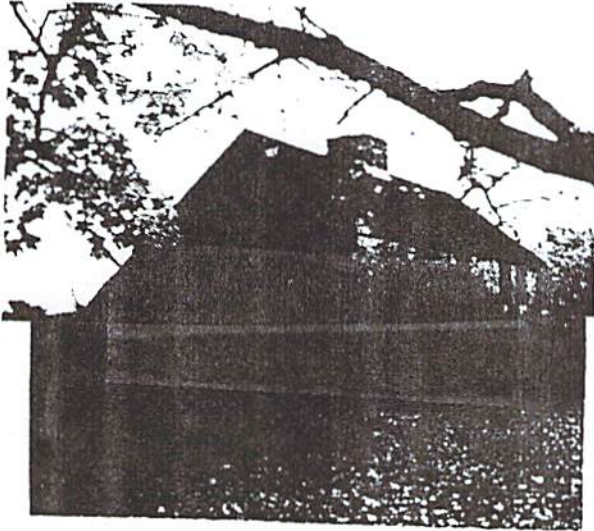
1666—This house located at the extreme end of Standish St. was built by Alexander Standish, the oldest son of Myles Standish who served many years as Duxbury's town clerk. It was owned for many years by the Allen family, whose daughter married David Patton. They are deceased and their 2 sons have put the ancient homestead up for sale.





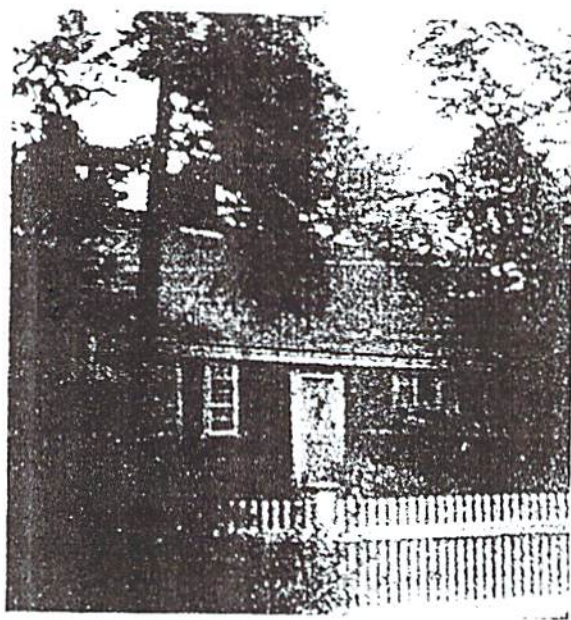
**Dr. Thomas Delano House, 1667**

1667—Dr. Thomas Delano, son of the Delano family, who joined the Pilgrim band in Leyden and were allotted the land now occupied by Duxbury High School bordering John Alden's holdings at the elbows of Blue Fish River built this house for his bride, Rebecca Alden in 1667. It was radically renovated 1933, presently occupied by the Neil Johnsons.



**Major John Bradford House, 1674**

1674—Major John Bradford, grandson of Plymouth's first governor, built this house on land allotted to his grandfather in 1627. It is now owned by the Jones River Village Historical Society of Kingston and is open summer weekends as a museum of Pilgrim lore.

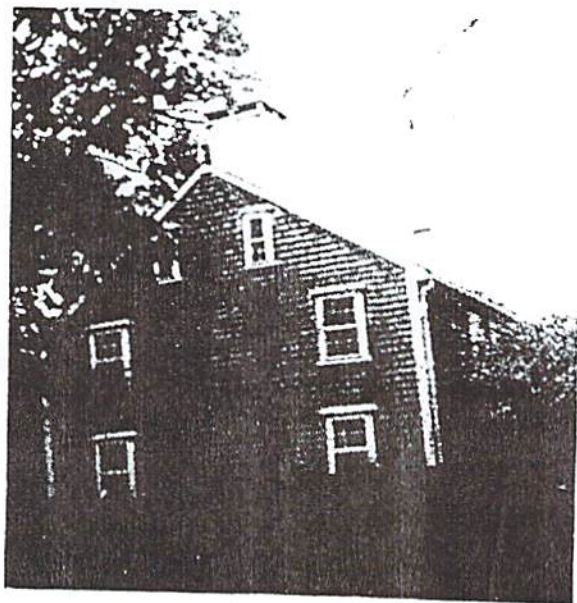


**Josiah Kean House, 1680**

1680—This is the "Mother House" of the Keene St. Enterprises built by Josiah Kean and occupied by his descendants for many years while a grist mill off the nearby pond furnished family activity serving farms for miles around. Augmented by a large house in 1845 it became a center for Camp Wing. The house has been modernized but its essential colonial lines have been preserved. Present owners are Maureen and Bruce Rutter, in separate advertising businesses.

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Thomas Loring House, 1691

1691—This residence formed the hub of a wide farming area and served as a witness to colonial life surviving a period in the mid-1800s when it saw all the Boston to Plymouth traffic on Bay Path and the stagecoach shifting of horses. I remember the apartment store, post office and Blacksmith shop nearby where the Merry's horses got new steel shoes at the changing of the seasons. The recent owner was a professor from Boston College who sold it to Lydia and Bob Hale in 1987.



Isaac Simmons House, 1696

1696—This house was built close to the end of the century and retained its colonial simplicity and primitive life style until it was bought in 1931 by the grandparents-in-law of the present owners. I was glad to note its cattle orientation as a vestige of colonial life in New England which was until a century ago a cattle-based economy. Pauline Harrington, a former Duxbury Selectman and currently teacher of political science at Bridgewater as well as a breeder of polled Hereford cattle is shown here.

It must have been a real wrench when the Pilgrims drew their lots for the new allotments of land in 1627—they had lived in the snug village for 7 years, but it was time to go out on their own, plant their crops, shelter their animals (at first they let them roam, fencing in only the buildings) and build their houses. These old dwellings that still stand in Duxbury are good reminders of how solidly they were built.

It is remarkable that none of these houses cited here has had to have a major construction replacement. When Mr. Blandings bought his old house in the hills of northern New Jersey he asked a builder friend of his to come and check it out. His friend looked at the chimney and then kicked the corner post starting a flow of dust and dirt from inside the post. Rendering his judgement he said, "Well, if you had a solid still foundation or a

sound chimney I would say we could build around either. But with this, my recommendation is to tear it all down and start over. It is an excellent location."

So far as I know no one has ever had this experience with Pilgrim vintage houses. They are as sound essentially as the day they were built, even after years of unusually rough use.

This is partly due I feel sure to the fact that although the hearts of these good folks were firmly rooted in heaven, their roots were dug deep into the soil of New England. They built well because they looked upon themselves as builders for eternity. Today as our Vice-president elect says we have erected a styrofoam wall between us and reality and the earth is being abused beyond repair. It is our task to restore this connection to the soil and reverence it and preserve it for coming generations.